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ABSTRACT

This review analyzes traditional standardized assessment practices to determine if they recognize cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and disability differences. It then examines the extent to which these assessment practices are being used in transition for decision-making and predicting post-school outcomes. The review begins with a historical overview of testing. It discusses three types of standardized assessments: norm-referenced, minimum-competency, and criterion-referenced tests. Alternatives to traditional standardized assessments are explored. The review concludes that the failure to consider sociocultural milieu, socioeconomic status, and linguistic and disability differences in test construction leads to false information about the status of learning and compounds bias in testing. Thus, minorities and students with disabilities, in particular, suffer as a result of traditional assessment practices, which have proven to be inaccurate and inconsistent, yet continue to be used in prediction, decision-making, and inferences about student performance and lifelong success. Current assessment practices stifle the post-school success of minorities and students with disabilities due to their inappropriate norming standards, discrimination, and exclusion. By examining individual student skills on specific tasks, alternative assessments appear to be a solution to eradicating biases. Reasonable and limited use of traditional standardized assessments for the purpose of decision-making, prediction, and inferences about students' post-school activities is recommended. (Contains 42 references.) (JDD)

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An Analysis of Transition Assessment Practices: Do They Recognize Cultural Differences?

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Abstract

For many students, current assessment practices do not reflect achievement or competency, thus raising questions of fairness in testing. This paper reviews specific assessment practices to determine their relevance to transition and the extent to which they consider cultural differences. Assessment practices that are prediction-oriented are based on norm groups that do not adequately represent cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and disability differences. As a result, minorities and students with disabilities are being socially and economically repressed. In contrast, assessment practices that describe true abilities and competencies may ultimately improve students' transition from school to post-school activities.

An Analysis of Transition Assessment Practices: Do They Recognize Cultural Differences?

As the population of the United States becomes more culturally pluralistic, it is particularly important to identify assessment practices that are sensitive to all cultures and disabilities, particularly as assessment is typically the first stage toward identifying someone as eligible for services. Typically, standardized assessment instruments are normed on the dominant American mainstream culture to predict performance (Witt, Elliot, Gresham, & Kramer, 1988). As a result, they contain components that are biased against minorities and students with disabilities (Cline, 1992) by failing to differentiate cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and disability differences (Cummins, 1989). Indeed, some test reviewers are no longer recommending many of these tests (Hammill, Brown, & Bryant, 1992).

Fortunately, some instruments are sufficiently reliable to measure students with disabilities (Heward & Orlansky, 1992). Such instruments are characterized by national norm samples that represent comparative populations (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1988). Although PL 94-142 mandated multifactored assessment standards, its provisions do not safeguard students with disabilities against assessment biases. Instead, this legislation, which relies on the results of traditional standardized assessment instruments, has led to labelling and justification of placement outside the regular school program for many students at an alarming rate over the past 15 years (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992).

Bias-free assessment has specific relevance to transition. With increasing numbers of culturally diverse students with disabilities being recognized within the educational system, appropriate assessment practices are necessary to guarantee effective transition to post-school activities (Walker, 1987). Specifically, transition assessment practices are needed that recognize cultural and disability differences. Unfortunately, many currently used transition assessment instruments are biased, thereby generating errors in

prediction, decision-making, and inferences regarding students with disabilities (Rusch, Rose, & Greenwood, 1988).

Many researchers have called for alternative assessment measures. For example, authentic, or performance-based, assessment practices must be recognized as alternative measures of student knowledge, ability, or skills and as identifiers of individual strengths and weaknesses (Medina & Neill, 1990).

Assessment practices that are sensitive to norming must be identified or developed if bias against minorities and students with disabilities is to be reduced. Norming that includes diverse populations are more likely to produce favorable results for minorities and students with disabilities in post-school activities.

The purpose of this review is to analyze traditional standardized assessment practices and determine if they recognize cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and disability differences. Further, this analysis will determine the extent these assessment practices are being used in transition for decision-making and predicting post-school outcomes.

Historical Overview of Testing

Psychological testing or assessment began in the United States prior to the nineteenth century as an attempt "to eliminate the traditional European use of heredity or lineage as a criterion for achievement and to identify a method that would be based upon more objective standards" (Wyatt, 1982, p. 120). Ford, Harris and Winborne (1989-1990) disagree with this view, suggesting that standardized tests were designed to divert the early desegregation movement involving minorities, thereby maintaining the social and economic repression of African- Americans (Gomez, Graue, & Bloch, 1991).

Historically, minorities, particularly African-Americans, were perceived as intellectually inferior to Anglo Americans based on brain dimensions (Gould, 1981). Similarly, Jencks (1972) claimed that intelligence was based on a genetic or biological

framework. Such perceptions legitimized the poor performances of African-American students on IQ and achievement tests.

For Anglo Americans, past injustices against African- Americans has led to an elevated status, prestige, and economic rewards and opportunities (Ford et al., 1989-1990). In fact, standardized assessments have perpetuated the disproportionate representation of this culture in advanced and higher education. Ethnic inequality continues to persist against African-Americans and other minority cultures limiting educational and occupational opportunities.

Although the American achievement ideology credits education as the key to success, prosperity, and dreams for **all** students, in reality, education remains biased in favor of Anglo Americans (Ford, 1992). Currently and throughout history, minorities and low socioeconomic students have been more likely to be tested and referred to or placed in special education programs. Further, minority students are **disproportionately** referred to special education programs when their socioeconomic status is substantially lower than the norm of the community (Walker, 1987).

Many African-American students, for example, experience environmental stress such as racism and discrimination along with poverty (Ford et al., 1989-1990). Claiming that discrimination, either intentional or inadvertent, still exists in America, Rhodes (1992) proposed that special endeavors must be made to guarantee that African-American students receive the opportunity to attain to their utmost potential.

Minority groups, especially African-Americans, are dissuaded both directly and indirectly from attaining a fair and equal education. For example, placement in special education continues to be the primary focus of standardized assessment, contributing to less challenging curricula, limited thinking, and segregation. With these educational limitations, many frustrated minority students feel forced to exit the system. Such exclusionary practices narrow students' abilities, knowledge, and skills compounding

past inequities associated with testing. As a result, minority students are visibly underrepresented in high-status positions and higher education.

Tompkins and Mehring (1989) questioned the appropriateness of a given test instrument to measure the academic proficiency or competency of culturally diverse students. At present, there is a lack of "standard conventions for judging the adequacy of a test's content validity" (Crocker, Miller, & Franks, 1989, p. 193). Normally, test items can only be proven biased by statistical analysis (Hilton, 1991). Trying to validate the presence of linguistic and cultural bias is difficult due to the invisible quality of many central aspects of culture (Harry, 1992; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1986). According to Wyatt (1982), standardized assessments frequently "combine all minority students in one group category, entitled 'nonwhite children', without regard to experiential, cultural, language, or dialect differences" (p. 123).

In fact, standardized assessments are highly ethnocentric, ignoring and overlooking the knowledge valued by many cultures (Alexander & Parsons, 1991). Additionally, standardized assessments are developed, published, and benefitted from by Anglo Americans yet used to assess and predict performances on minority cultures (Witt et al., 1988; Zeidner, 1986). In order to avoid bias in testing, McLoughlin and Lewis (1986) argued the need for culture-fair and culture-specific measures, as well as separate norms for minority groups. In contrast, other researchers have suggested that ethnic differences are a product of "mental maturity" and, therefore, not artifacts of bias in testing (Rotatori, Fox, Sexton, & Miller, 1990).

Haney and Madaus (1989) maintained that standardized assessments give false information about the status of learning by focusing on simple skills as opposed to high-order thinking. Alexander and Parsons (1991), in turn, contended that standardized assessments constitute a form of quality control that exhibits discriminatory mechanisms used to circumvent social discrimination (Stake, Bettridge, Metzer, & Switzer, 1987).

That is, the dominant American mainstream culture maintains assessment advantages over minority cultures.

On a broad scale, Medina and Neill (1990) maintained that standardized assessments shift authority into an unregulated testing industry that undermines school improvement such as focusing on basic skills, not high order thinking or creativity. In reality, standardized assessments purposely exclude minorities, thereby contributing to nonproductive, socially maladjusted, and highly stigmatized members of society.

Standardized assessments are also used to determine the eligibility of services and predict the performance of students with mental retardation and other disabilities (Menchetti, Rusch & Owens, 1983; Ysseldyke et al., 1992). Specifically, in transition, standardized assessments are predominantly used as decision-making devices and predictors of post-school outcomes. The lack of adequate norming for students with disabilities reflects the injustices and educational inequities minorities have experienced for centuries.

In determining and maintaining the educational rights of students with disabilities as well as minorities, assessments must refrain from obstructing opportunities due to inadequate and unjust standardized practices. Willingham (1989) suggested eight comparability marks that should be used when assessing students with disabilities. These include comparable item functioning, comparable reliability, comparable predicted performance, comparable admissions decisions, comparable test content, comparable testing accommodations, and comparable test timing.

Standardized assessments are biased and ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, and having a disability contribute to the inaccuracy with which these assessments predict. Additionally, standardized assessments are normed on groups with different characteristics from those with whom the assessment is intended, thereby generating errors in decision-making and prediction for minorities and students with disabilities. Assessment results provide answers to significant behavioral, physical, or academic

problems that are being proposed, but the results can sometimes transform the problems; it is imperative, therefore, that assessment information be used wisely, equally, and fairly.

Traditional Standardized Assessments

Standardized assessments are characterized by several researchers as being objective, normatively fair, and exhibiting reliable and valid outcomes (Borg & Gall, 1989). Such tests measure individuals and groups on knowledge, intelligence, personality, skill, or aptitude as well as label, classify and evaluate (Gay, 1987).

Typically, three types of standardized assessments are used in education: norm-referenced, minimum-competency, and criterion-referenced tests (Borg & Gall, 1989). These will be examined below.

Norm-referenced assessments. These assessments are designed to compare a student's performance with that of other students of the same age (Gay, 1987). Advocates of this type of assessment argue that it furnishes knowledge that is useful for ability and instructional grouping. Nonsupporters, however, maintain that curriculum-based instruction and monitoring are stronger predictors of achievement for future instruction (Ysseldyke et al., 1992). Examples of norm-referenced assessments include intelligence, academic achievement, language and speech, perceptual motor, adaptive behavior, affective and behavioral measures, and interest or vocational aptitude tests (Rusch et al., 1988).

A major concern with norm-referenced assessment is that the proper percentage of minorities have not always been represented in the norming process (Medina & Neill, 1990). Thus, although these assessments work well with those populations on which they have been standardized, they are less efficient with other populations including ethnic-minority populations and students with disabilities (Tompkins & Mehring, 1989). Additionally, the assessment content does not adequately reflect actual classroom content. Further, assessments of achievement fail to recognize the standard

developmental differences that exist among cultures. For example, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R) has remained basically unaltered since it was first published in 1949 (Medina & Neill, 1990).

Minimum-competency tests (MCT). These assessments are designed to determine whether students meet a particular minimal standard prior to continuing with their education (Madsen, 1991). Students with disabilities are not included in the development of MCT norms or the "items and indices of reliability and validity" (DeStefano & Metzer, 1991, p. 286). Further, although programs for students with disabilities frequently focus less on academic than nonacademic subjects, these students are expected to achieve the educational level necessary to pass the MCT (Samuels, 1987). However, some states make allowances for students with disabilities by offering extended time for taking the tests and variations in test administration. In reality, students with disabilities often perform poorly on the MCT and many receive certificates of completion instead of diplomas after failing to meet the requirements to pass.

For minorities, as for students with disabilities, the failure rate on MCT is much higher than for Anglo American students, indicating that "prior discrimination, inadequate teaching, poor education, and other social and economic factors" (p. 98) may be contributing factors (Herring, 1989). Comparing the MCT reading and math scores of Anglo American, Native American, and African-American students in southeastern North Carolina, Herring (1989) found that both ethnicity and sex influenced the scores. Specifically, the Anglo American group scored significantly higher than either Native Americans or African-Americans on math and reading. No significant difference was found between Native Americans and African-Americans on math scores; however, Native Americans scored significantly higher than African-Americans on reading.

Madsen (1991) saw minimum-competency tests as being used purposely to discriminate against African-American students. Similarly, according to Medina and

Neill (1990), the lower test scores of racial and ethnic minorities reflect and compound the bias that exists in the educational system in America.

Criterion-referenced assessments. The third type of standardized assessment, criterion-referenced, is reflected in current trends in education. Assessing individual student competencies on specific tasks contrasts with norm-referenced assessments that tend to generate biases against minorities and students with disabilities by comparing individual performances with other students' performances. Salvia and Ysseldyke (1988) identified five terms in current use that originated in criterion-referenced assessments:

1. **curriculum-based assessment** determines the instructional needs of students based on their performance;
2. **objective-referenced assessment** is referenced to specific instructional objectives rather than the performance of a norm group;
3. **direct and frequent measurement** focuses on direct and frequent assessment of specific skills;
4. **direct assessment** evaluates pupil progress through the curriculum; and
5. **formative evaluation** is an ongoingassessmentactivity designed to monitor or keep track of pupil progress.

Criterion-referenced assessments measure student performance against specified objectives to be mastered in the basic skill area and the degree of content mastery expected (Rotatori et al., 1990). Such assessments are useful for program planning and monitoring student progress by providing a basis for determining what students can do and what skills and information they need to acquire (Rusch et al., 1988). Some examples of criterion-referenced assessments focusing on developmental skills and academic achievement include the Brigance Inventory of Basic Skills, Multilevel Academic Skill Inventory, and Diagnostic Mathematics Inventory (Rusch et al., 1988).

In spite of their many advantages, criterion-referenced assessments can be gravely compromised by biases and values of the individual or group responsible for setting the criteria (Salivia & Ysseldyke, 1988). That is, teachers may fail to construct tests that reflect information sensitive to minorities and students with disabilities. Also, Mehrens and Lehmann (1987) saw several limitations to criterion-referenced assessments, including:

1. detailed specifications and inappropriate content sampling are lacking;
2. may influence teachers to teach primarily to the minimal mastery level;
3. no guarantee that test item prescriptions are used; and
4. students' failure to master an objective is not always clear.

Similarly, Wiggins (1989) suggested that criterion-referenced assessments rehearse students to learn and are inadequate for producing mastery.

Supporters of standardized assessments argue that these instruments were developed by experts and, therefore, are well constructed, and vital for assessing student knowledge and achievement, and that they present valid and reliable data (Feuer, Fulton, & Morrison, 1993). However, others argue that "relying on standardized tests will lead to a weaker, not stronger, educational system" (p. 6); that is, standardized assessments limit curricula, increase student drop-out rates, restrict teachers, and sabotage school improvement (Medina & Neill, 1990). Such assessments are used to measure achievement, ability, or skill and to evaluate students' performances in non-normal, time-limited, or otherwise constrained situations. The result of these tests shape instruction and sample students' behavior for the purpose of making decisions. Despite criticisms regarding their use, criterion-referenced assessments appear to be the preferred method of standardized assessment and a likely solution to the biases otherwise associated with this type of testing.

Alternatives to Standardized Assessment

President Bush (1991) called for nationwide standardized testing as an educational strategy, with strong emphasis on achievement testing. However, this accountability-driven system introduced originally during the Reagan administration has proven unsuccessful (Cline, 1992). Although test scores increased initially, evidence has shown that students were taught to take tests and that a large segment of the curriculum was purposely eliminated (Haney & Madaus, 1989). In reality, therefore, student achievement was not being measured. As a result, researchers in educational assessment have criticized the indirect measure of students' learning and achievement based on comparisons, calling for a new wave in assessment (Gomez et al., 1991). This new wave includes alternative assessments (Alexander & Parsons, 1991).

Worthen (1993), for example, described such measures as "direct assessment," "authentic assessment," "performance assessment," and more generically "alternative assessment." Other researchers use such terms as "dynamic assessment" or "portfolio assessment" (Gomez et al., 1991).

The main focus of these assessment measures is to generate alternatives to traditional standardized assessments and to directly examine student performance on significant tasks that relate to life away from school (Worthen, 1993). Another focus is on empowering teachers to take control of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment process (Gomez et al., 1991). For example, Madaus (1993) claimed that "performance based assessments in the hands of teachers, seamlessly integrated in normal classroom routines, should be more useful to them for formative and diagnostic purposes than traditional, standardized tests have ever been" (p. 11). Finally, alternative assessment aims at eradicating traditional assessment practices that maintain the social and economic repression of minority cultures (Mitchell, 1988).

Although alternative assessments have recently gained major national attention, teachers have been using such measurements for years in the form of "running records"

or "portfolios" (Worthen, 1993). Gomez et al. (1991) studied portfolio assessment in elementary-school classrooms and found they were "unambiguously positive", and that already over-burdened teachers were the key to its success. Using alternative assessment measures is "labor-intensive, time-consuming and makes it difficult to compare, rank and sort students" (Haney & Madaus, 1989, p. 704). However, these assessments can be used to "diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of students and assist them, rather than sort, stratify or segregate them" (Medina & Neill, 1990, p. 35). Wiggins (1989) suggested that a student's pattern of success or failure can be observed in the context of numerous performances. An examination system based largely on performance assessment will "promote the unmotivated, lift all students to 'world class' standards, help increase our nation's productivity, and contribute to the restoration of our global competitiveness" (Madaus, 1993, p. 14). Also, minorities and students with disabilities would benefit from alternative assessment practices, which would render traditional standardized assessment practices obsolete in decision-making and predicting students' post-school activities. This assessment movement requires resources and time (Worthen, 1993) and may exceed the cost of purchasing and implementing standardized assessments (Feuer, et al., 1993). Yet, performance, portfolios, and products may be the predominant measurement mode of choice in the new examination system.

Conclusion

The failure to consider sociocultural milieu, socioeconomic status, as well as linguistic and disability differences in test construction leads to false information about the status of learning and compounds bias in testing (Harry, 1992). Thus, minorities and students with disabilities, in particular, are suffering as a result of traditional assessment practices, which have proven to be inaccurate and inconsistent, yet continue to be used in prediction, decision-making, and inferences about student performance and lifelong success.

Current assessment practices stifle the post-school success of minorities and students with disabilities due to their inappropriate norming standards, discrimination, and exclusion. Thus, evidence suggests that standardized assessments reflect mainly the norms, concepts, language, ability, and skills valued by the dominant American middle-class culture in this country, yet are used heavily to predict the performances of all students, including those from minority cultures and students with disabilities.

By examining individual student skills on specific tasks, alternative assessments appear to be a solution to eradicating biases associated with traditional testing. Finally, educators use a variety of assessment practices to make transition-related decisions for students with disabilities. Yet, specific assessment practices are necessary if students with disabilities are to transition successfully to post-school activities. Minorities and students with disabilities are entitled to assessment practices that appropriately reflect their academic proficiency and competency. Such practices require reasonable and limited use of traditional standardized assessments for the purpose of decision-making, prediction, and inferences about students' post-school activities.

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